

First-Generation Faculty

David Beard considers how coming from a family where people didn't go to college influences the way he interacts with his colleagues.

By [David Beard](#) // March 4, 2013

[27 COMMENTS \(/ADVICE/2013/03/04/ESSAY-IMPACT-BEING-FIRST-GENERATION-COLLEGE-GRAD-WHEN-ONE-JOINS-ACADEMIC#DISQUS_THREAD\)](#)



I've been reflecting on my spectacularly unsuccessful ethos as a professional within my department.

I write "within my department" because I think that the ethos that carries me far enough in the field is one I'm thinking doesn't work well in a departmental context. And to be clear, I've been a faculty member in two departments, so I'm not complaining about my department.

A colleague-friend once pointed out that I'm basically a puppy dog in my local professional interactions -- eager to be liked. I think there's a limited accuracy to that statement, so I'll accept it but add a little nuance. My attitude is not a desire to be liked; rather, it's a desire not to be disliked, which stems from being a first-generation college student.

Context: Like many of my colleagues and friends in rhetorical studies, I was a first-gen student. I am only the fifth person in my entire family to make it past middle school. And like a lot of first-gen kids, I experienced substantial dislocation from my family. As a kid, my great-grandparents and my grandparents and my great-aunt lived together in a three-bedroom house. Some were retired, some worked part-time, and some did the early shift, the end result being that we always were home together by 4 p.m., in time for late afternoon game shows and dinner by 4:30. (It was years before I learned that most people eat after 5 p.m..)

Growing up, I recognized three things. (1) My ability to answer "Jeopardy" questions before anyone else in the family quickly went from being cute to being annoying. (2) Being smart was something my family could be proud of, but I could never be proud of it. In fact, being proud of being brainy was a bad move at home or school. (Very quickly, in second grade, while playing "Smurfs" on the playground -- in which all the boys imagined adventures with each other by assuming the role of a single Smurf -- I ceased being "Brainy" Smurf in favor of "Handy" Smurf, an immense irony given my complete inability to fix anything). (3) There was a fine line between being smart and being the kind of person my grandparents would be suspicious of -- someone who would try to trick them with cleverness. I totally get people who are suspect of the intelligentsia, the ivory tower academic, because those people are my family.

When I got my M.A., I received congratulations. I also received an exhortation that it was time to get a job and stop this school foolishness, which was clearly a way to avoid a job. When I pulled out my National Council of Teachers of English card, my grandfather's first question was whether that meant I was union.

2. When you argue, make clear what personal biases and motivations are setting that argument in motion. Even if those biases undercut your argument. Because honesty is a better survival method than success. Success is fleeting and can collapse out from under you. But if you are honest, you will remain on level ground. Family will relate to you consistently because they know who and where you are.

3. Never argue from expertise. Arguing from expertise is too close to arguing from being "Brainy."

This looks like a good idea for keeping the affection or at least avoiding raising the ire of my family (who, I know, loved me without reservations – I don't mean to suggest that they loved me any way other than that). It was a great way of being a grandson. It's a terrible way of being a colleague. I think I have discovered three things that I would share with an academic son or daughter, were I to have one:

1. Transparency doesn't work with people who presume that other people are not transparent.

2. Maybe "family will relate to you consistently because they know who and where you are," but so will colleagues, and they will be able to outthink you all the time because you are on their map and they are not on yours.

3. Expertise is never recognized locally, whether you argue from it or not. Expertise is often recognized across the discipline, but only sometimes within the department.

Again, these are not local claims nor an expression of any local conditions. Rather, I want to raise the question on my mind: How does being a first-generation student screw up professionalization behaviors? I think I have my answer, but what do you think? And do you have any reading suggestions? Give me more than a citation – give me a reason to read!

Bio

David Beard is associate professor of rhetoric, scientific and technical communication at the University of Minnesota at Duluth.

Read more by [David Beard](#)

[jump to comments \(#comment-target\)](#)



[\(/print/advice/2013/03/04/essay-impact-being-first-generation-college-grad-when-one-joins-academic?width=775&height=500&iframe=true\)](#)

Be the first to know.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/content/sign-inside-higher-eds-newsletters>

Get our **free** daily newsletter.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/content/sign-inside-higher-eds-newsletters>

Work/School Email

Yes, please!



WANT TO ADVERTISE? CLICK HERE ([HTTPS://WWW.INSIDEHIGHERED.COM/ADVERTISE](https://www.insidehighered.com/advertise))



(https://careers.insidehighered.com/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Browse Jobs by Category](#)

Faculty Jobs (<https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?>

[Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&FacultyJobs=1&FacultyJobs=12&FacultyJobs=20&FacultyJobs=21&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs](https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&FacultyJobs=1&FacultyJobs=12&FacultyJobs=20&FacultyJobs=21&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Arts & Humanities \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/arts-and-humanities/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/arts-and-humanities/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Education \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/education/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/education/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Engineering & Mathematics \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/engineering-and-mathematics/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/engineering-and-mathematics/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Health & Medical \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/health-and-medical/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/health-and-medical/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Professional Fields \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/professional-fields/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/professional-fields/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Science & Technology \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/science-and-technology/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/science-and-technology/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Social Sciences \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/social-sciences/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/social-sciences/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

[Technical & Vocational Fields \(https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/technical-and-vocational-fields/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs\)](https://careers.insidehighered.com/jobs/technical-and-vocational-fields/?utm_source=ihe&utm_medium=editorial-site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

Administrative Jobs (<https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?>

[Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&AdministrativeJobs=71&AdministrativeJobs=79&AdministrativeJobs=80&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs](https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&AdministrativeJobs=71&AdministrativeJobs=79&AdministrativeJobs=80&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

Executive Administration Jobs (<https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?>

[Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=67&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=68&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=69&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs](https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=67&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=68&ExecutiveAdministrationJobs=69&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)

Jobs Outside Higher Education (<https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?>

[Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=118&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=119&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=120&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs](https://careers.insidehighered.com/searchjobs/?Keywords=&radialtown=&LocationId=&RadialLocation=20&NearFacetsShown=true&CountryCode=&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=118&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=119&JobsOutsideHigherEducation=120&site&utm_content=sidebar-link&utm_campaign=jobs)



Hide comments

Opinions on Inside Higher Ed



[\(/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion\)](/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion)

Attending an Elite College Is an Identity [\(/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion\)](/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion)



[\(/views/2018/01/08/why-experiential-learning-often-isnt-good-classroom-learning-opinion\)](/views/2018/01/08/why-experiential-learning-often-isnt-good-classroom-learning-opinion)

On 'Experiential Learning' [\(/views/2018/01/08/why-experiential-learning-often-isnt-good-classroom-learning-opinion\)](/views/2018/01/08/why-experiential-learning-often-isnt-good-classroom-learning-opinion)



[\(/views/2018/01/05/essay-library-congresss-twitter-archive\)](/views/2018/01/05/essay-library-congresss-twitter-archive)

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time [\(/views/2018/01/05/essay-library-congresss-twitter-archive\)](/views/2018/01/05/essay-library-congresss-twitter-archive)

Inside Higher Ed's Blog U

[Just Visiting \(/blogs/just-visiting\)](/blogs/just-visiting)

What I Got Wrong About Turning Point USA [\(/blogs/just-visiting/what-i-got-wrong-about-turning-point-usa\)](/blogs/just-visiting/what-i-got-wrong-about-turning-point-usa)

[Confessions of a Community College Dean \(/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean\)](/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean)

A Different Kind of Difficult Conversation [\(/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/different-kind-difficult-conversation\)](/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/different-kind-difficult-conversation)

[Technology and Learning \(/blogs/technology-and-learning\)](/blogs/technology-and-learning)

Your School Should Not Pursue Online Education for the Money [\(/blogs/technology-and-learning/your-school-should-not-pursue-online-education-money\)](/blogs/technology-and-learning/your-school-should-not-pursue-online-education-money)

[Library Babel Fish \(/blogs/library-babel-fish\)](/blogs/library-babel-fish)

Barred [\(/blogs/library-babel-fish/barred-0\)](/blogs/library-babel-fish/barred-0)

[Call to Action: Marketing and Communications in Higher Education \(/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education\)](/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education)

Follow the Smoke in 2018 [\(/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/follow-smoke-2018\)](/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/follow-smoke-2018)

[Technology and Learning \(/blogs/technology-and-learning\)](/blogs/technology-and-learning)

What Would You Do If You Had Won the \$559M Powerball Jackpot? [\(/blogs/technology-and-learning/what-would-you-do-if-you-had-won-559m-powerball-jackpot\)](/blogs/technology-and-learning/what-would-you-do-if-you-had-won-559m-powerball-jackpot)

WHAT OTHERS ARE READING

After hazing death, fraternity banned from Pennsylvania for 10 years [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/after-hazing-death-fraternity-banned-pennsylvania-10-years\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/after-hazing-death-fraternity-banned-pennsylvania-10-years)

Attending an elite college is an identity, too (opinion) [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/01/09/attending-elite-college-identity-too-opinion)

Professors debate the role of the historian (or lack thereof) in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Vietnam documentary [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/professors-debate-role-historian-or-lack-theoef-ken-burns-and-lynn-novicks-vietnam\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/professors-debate-role-historian-or-lack-theoef-ken-burns-and-lynn-novicks-vietnam)

\$110 Million for Football-Related Buyouts [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/01/09/110-million-football-related-buyouts\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/01/09/110-million-football-related-buyouts)

Controversial start-up university fires founding faculty members [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/controversial-start-university-fires-founding-faculty-members\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/controversial-start-university-fires-founding-faculty-members)

Tennessee colleges face achievement gaps and decreasing adult student enrollment [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/tennessee-colleges-face-achievement-gaps-and-decreasing-adult-student-enrollment\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/09/tennessee-colleges-face-achievement-gaps-and-decreasing-adult-student-enrollment)

New book argues most colleges are about to face significant decline in prospective students [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/01/08/new-book-argues-most-colleges-are-about-face-significant-decline\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/01/08/new-book-argues-most-colleges-are-about-face-significant-decline)

Berkeley Backs Undocumented Student [\(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/01/09/berkeley-backs-undocumented-student\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/01/09/berkeley-backs-undocumented-student)